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AUTHOR	Chavez, Maria D.
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ABSTRACT

In 1985, the Early Childhood and Family Education Program (ECFEP) established a preschool in a Hispanic neighborhood in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This paper discusses the risks for families in this community, and the ways in which these risks can be countered by an empowerment process model. The operation of the preschool is intended to empower parents. At the beginning of the school year, parents are timid at meetings with staff; but by the end of the year, parents are developing their own agendas and initiating their own tasks. The ECFEP has been able to facilitate this empowerment process because it has been concerned with the strengths of families and individuals, and guided by the respectful intervention process as described by Father Pantin in this document. As parents become empowered in the process of operating their preschool, they pass successively through several steps; they become observers, learners, collaborators, teachers, leaders, and finally, change agents. Members of the staff evolve from change agents to observers. The research literature on risk factors is reviewed, and risk assessment models are discussed. These models include an additive model and a model of accretion of risks over time. The process of empowerment is illustrated by three case studies. (BC)

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Risk factors and the process of empowerment

María D. Chávez

Early Childhood And Family Education Program
University of New Mexico
College of Education
Albuquerque, New Mexico
United States of America

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Editorial history

Risk Factors and the Process of Empowerment has not been previously published. Portions of this paper were initially prepared and presented at a planning session for an international at-risk study conference, organized by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) in Paris, France, on January 17-18, 1989.

The two graphic models of the empowerment process (Figures 1 and 2) were originally used in the Early Childhood and Family Education Program's Phase II proposal to the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 1987. These models were also included in the author's doctoral dissertation, *Parental Involvement of Low-Income Hispanic Parents in a Pre-school Education Program and their Children's Cognitive Development* (1988), and were later re-designed for inclusion in this paper.

The three case studies included here were developed specifically for this paper. They have not previously been released in any form.

About the author

Dr. María D. Chávez received her Ed.D degree from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in Multicultural Teacher Education at the University of New Mexico, USA.

At present she is the Senior Program Director and Principal Investigator for the Early Childhood and Family Education Program in New Mexico, USA.

Dr. Chávez is currently also an appointed member of the New Mexico State Board of Education, which sets policies on all financial and programmatic issues which affect education in the state's public elementary and secondary schools. She is an appointed member of the Governor's Hispanic Bipartisan Advisory Committee to the Senate Republican Task Force of the 101st US Congress. As a member of the National Association of State Boards of Education, Dr. Chávez serves as an elected member of its Resolutions Committee and a member of its Parent and Community Involvement Task Force.

About the project

The experiences in this paper are drawn from the evolving work in a low income area of Albuquerque, New Mexico where the Early Childhood and Family Education Program (ECFEP) has, since 1985, worked with Hispanic families. ECFEP provides pre-school education for children aged three to five in four pre-schools in the community, and involves the parents as teachers on a rotation basis. Additionally, ECFEP offers support to parents through home visits, informal adult education and classes in English as a Second Language, counselling, a family support group, access to higher education opportunities as well as direct support from an inter-agency team with a myriad of services which, among others, address issues of health, social, legal, housing, language, women and children and unemployment.

The project is funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in collaboration with the University of New Mexico's College of Education. The basic intent of ECFEP is to activate the resources of homes, local services and the community to support young Hispanic children's healthy development, and at the same time, seek to enable families to help themselves. Additionally, the project supports parent and para-professional development and influences early childhood and family educational policies in New Mexico, and internationally.

Since its inception, the project's concentration on empowering Hispanic parents has influenced city and state policy and practice in early childhood and parent education. ECFEP's experience has already been emulated outside of New Mexico by various other projects, and its ideas have been cited extensively in publications. Its social value lies in the fact that parents with restricted or minimal ability to support their own or their children's development have, during a sustained exposure to the programme, become better able to control their environment and as a result are now more productive and self-sufficient members of society.

Bernard van Leer Foundation

Risk factors and the process of empowerment

María D. Chávez

Early Childhood And Family Education Program
University of New Mexico
College of Education
Albuquerque, New Mexico
United States of America

The Hague, The Netherlands
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RISK FACTORS AND THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT

The label 'at-risk' is currently in high fashion. An immense array of individuals, including newborn babies, pre-school- and school-aged children, adolescents, parents and the elderly, are proclaimed at-risk by daily stories in the media, and the factors which determine their perceived risks are the topics of countless articles in professional journals and discussions by politicians and task forces. But what precisely is meant by the label 'at-risk'? How can the wealth of available information be practically applied to assist at-risk populations, and what constitutes 'success' in such an endeavor?

This paper addresses these questions as they apply to one community, from the perspective of one program working successfully within that community. Empowerment – defined here as the process of encouraging parents and children to recognize and maximize their inherent strengths, and to use these strengths to set their own agendas for their lives – is examined within various contexts: the program's current success and its historical evolution; the factors in the environment that place families at risk, along with the ways in which these may be effectively countered by empowerment process models; and applicatory case studies.

Implementation

The Early Childhood and Family Education Program (ECFEP) began work through the process which Father Pantin[1] has called 'respectful intervention' – that is, staff members knocked on doors throughout the neighborhood and asked, in essence, 'How can we help you?'

1. Pantin, G. (1984). *The Servol Village: A Caribbean Experience in Education and Community*. Bernard van Leer Foundation International Series on Education. Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope.

The answer, when it finally appeared, was pre-school education. Parents in this volatile community were beset by environmental concerns, and saw education as the primary antidote to the risk factors surrounding their families. They were concerned that their children did well in school, that they obtained the readiness skills necessary for formal education, that they became proficient in both English and Spanish languages, and that they eventually became productive citizens in society at large.

Accordingly, Escuelita Alegre pre-school was established in the fall of 1985, supported and extended by parental involvement, home visits and parent group meetings. The pre-school curriculum, largely directed by parents' involvement in predicting the outcomes they wanted for their children, emphasizes bilingual language development, multicultural socialization and content, and a developmental approach to learning through play.

There is now some statistical evidence that children are gaining from their participation in the pre-school. A formal study of the cognitive development of children enrolled in Escuelita Alegre showed a significant gain in cognitive test

scores when compared with children enrolled in an academically similar program without parental involvement.[2] Moreover, informal communication with staff of the local elementary schools indicates that program graduates are notably well prepared academically and well adjusted socially. Teachers are also impressed with the levels of school involvement shown by parents formerly with ECFEP: three of the four PTA officers in one elementary school servicing the South Broadway community are parents of Escuelita Alegre graduates.

2. Chávez, M.D. (1988). *Parental Involvement of Low-Income Hispanic Parents in a Pre-school Education Program and their Children's Cognitive Development.* Ed.D dissertation, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.

The reasons for the program's apparent effectiveness in also enriching family life would seem to include the quality of personal relationships and the positive role models for both men and women provided within the program. The quality of the learning environment benefits from the good adult-child ratios ensured by the active parent involvement in the classroom, together with the use of foster grandparents, as well as the natural, unforced approach to bilingual and cultural activities.

Parent empowerment

Although the pre-school forms the program's operational nucleus, today the process of empowerment as it relates to the ECFEP model is most evident in the adult group meetings. All parents of Escuelita Alegre children belong to the parent organization. In formal meetings led by elected parent officers, these parents guide content and policy for the pre-school and provide one another with a support group for the empowerment process.

These meetings also serve to formulate a framework which guides staff in the provision of services. After parents decide on outcomes, the staff assist them in developing activities that will address the parents' expectations.

At the beginning of the school year, most new parents are timid and passive, waiting to be told what to do and leaving all the talking to the program staff. By the end of the year, however, it is the staff who ask the parents permission for the opportunity to speak. Parents develop their own agendas and initiate and carry out their own tasks. They create and circulate the project newsletter, and assume the critical roles in decision making.

This past year, for example, the parent group, without staff input, decided to hold a graduation ceremony for pre-schoolers 'graduating' into the public kindergarten. They formed committees and worked at raising funds. The ceremony snowballed into a massive community event, with a rented auditorium, printed invitations and programs, formal speeches and entertainment. Public officials and the news media were invited, and a proclamation was issued by the mayor's office proclaiming the date as 'Escuelita Alegre Day'.

Parents enrolled in the program are also gaining confidence and control in other areas of their lives. Parents who dropped out of school are going back to obtain their Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) certificates. Others are seeking specialized job training, and some have enrolled in the local university. Community action is becoming a reality: program parents have petitioned the city school board to obtain better transportation for their older children, the police department for more effective patrolling, the city waste management division for neighborhood clean-up services, and the neighborhood public schools to establish parent-teacher associations.

Parents independently raise funds and seek donations for special pre-school events which the ECFEP budget cannot cover. In short, as illustrated by the case study of Laura (see page 4), they are beginning to make demands and seek solutions to concerns in their lives which are, on the surface, unrelated to educational goals for their children. They are becoming empowered.

Empowerment does not happen instantaneously. Father Pantin vividly describes the slow process of empowerment in a West Indies project:[3]

> ... you ask the now traditional ... question: 'How can I help you?' and you are given a variety of requests, some of which are genuine, others being more in the nature of a test to see whether *you* are genuine. ...You come back a few days later to report on the homework given you by the group: you have obtained jobs for 'Big Red', 'Shooter' and 'Ball'; you have secured the use of a school hall for the group to have a fundraising dance. ...There is grudging agreement that you have tried and the dialogue deepens: what they *really* want is a basketball court! ... Each time a goal has been achieved they come up with another scheme, another idea, which is what they *really* want. Because what they *really* want is to become independent men and women in their own right, to make their own decisions and to have access to those structures of power, influence and finance, which are essential factors in getting anything accomplished in this modern world.

3. Pantin, G. (1988). Keynote Address, Tenth International Seminar of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, held in Kingston, Jamaica. Reproduced in: *Children and Community: Progressing through Partnership*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Similarly, when parents in the South Broadway community were asked the question, 'How can we help you?', they began to function as decision makers. Over time, parents participating in ECFEP who were asked to teach children in a pre-school setting, design curriculum, and set policy for the pre-school, began to see themselves as people with the ability and power to accomplish these tasks.

What the South Broadway residents *really wanted* was a pre-school program for their children. They knew the risks inherent in their environment, and saw education as a way out. This perception and the hope for a better future implicit within it was a strength, and ECFEP used this strength as the pivotal point for action. Parents knew that local children tend to fail or underachieve in the school system and believed that by preparing children socially and educationally for school, they would be less likely to drop out early or turn to drugs. They saw from their own lives that education holds the key to improving life chances.

Risk factors: a community perspective

ECFEP's successes did not occur overnight. The story of the program's evolution, like the stories of enrolled parents, is a story of empowerment, and illustrates its slow and enlightening growth over time.

In the beginning, the ECFEP staff had no specific plans for program activities, and little knowledge of the South Broadway neighborhood beyond its generally violent reputation in the city. South Broadway was known to be a low-income area, and to support a high percentage of black and Hispanic residents. Tension existed between these groups, and to some degree between the indigenous Hispanic population and the growing numbers of Hispanic immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Unemployment was high, and educational test scores were low. News reports on the area were full of gang fighting, drug raids, and rampant alcoholism.

From this perspective, the neighborhood was considered 'at-risk', and the staff, then comprised of academics from the local university, was there to 'help'. According to the traditions of social welfare in the United States, this goal is generally addressed by imposing a highly defined model on the populace, designed to remedy a list of specific deficiencies and attended by rigid objectives and quantifiable criteria for evaluation. Indeed many such programs had tried and failed to remedy the community's many risk factors, and the people were left with a legacy of distrust for those seeking to help them. In the beginning, the

question 'How can we help you?' was not infrequently answered by blank stares or polite disengagement.

ECFEP boasted two immediate advantages over its predecessors in the South Broadway community:

a) it was concerned not with the weaknesses of its target population but with the strengths inherent in families and individuals; and

b) it was guided by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, whose methods, again, have been best put forth by Father Pantin of Trinidad:[4]

> ... *never* presume that you know the needs and priorities of people; confess your utter ignorance of their background, the way their minds work, the reasons for their attitudes, and ask them how they would like you to help.

4. Pantin (1988), op cit.

This is a difficult task for academics, whose educational and professional training and achievements have led them to view themselves as experts in possession of the answers. Moreover, the task of answering the question, 'How can we help you?' is difficult for people long conditioned by food stamps and welfare workers to cut through a red-tape system and take what they can get. Yet ECFEP's success in working for and with its target community was a direct result

Case Study: Laura

Laura feels good about herself as she reflects on her past. She has gained the courage and determination needed to change a dysfunctional lifestyle. She no longer needs to support and live with her alcoholic mother and the eighth live-in stepfather; she has found them a home and referred them for counseling. Now she can lend support to her mother without having to deal with the barrage of her constant problems. Having obtained legal assistance in placing a restraining order on the father of her two children, she no longer has to fight him over joint custody. Nor does she have to count on the meager welfare check – she has found a steady job in child care, and she is contemplating increasing her skills to get a better job. Now Laura can enjoy her children in her own rented apartment, with separate bedrooms for her and her boys. She feels in control of her life and extremely proud of her recent high school graduation equivalency diploma (GED).

Laura's life has not always been like this. When she entered the ECFEP program, Laura was an extremely hostile, frustrated individual. She rarely spoke, and sat with her eyes averted. A mother since she was 17, she maintained a distance from her children; she seldom hugged, laughed or played with them, and referred to them as 'the brats'. Yet she did not want to lose them to their father, the boyfriend with whom she no longer lived. Despite his beatings, which she did not have the courage to counter, she was concerned about what would happen to them in his care.

Laura was extremely shy and difficult to engage in conversation, but she needed someone who would listen. When she began to talk to staff, she seemed paralyzed by her problems. She had no money, she felt inadequate to raise her children, and, to add to her burdens, she had to provide care and shelter for her mother and her mother's current husband, both severe alcoholics. The three adults and two children were crowded into the tiny two-room home she had rented. With few job skills and no high school diploma, she was unable to find a paying job.

The ECFEP director's experience during a home visit to Laura's family illustrates her situation at that time, and also exemplifies some of her inherent strengths. The purpose of the visit was to participate in a learning activity which Laura had developed for her children during the group meetings. Before the activity could begin, Laura's mother and stepfather began to fight: the stepfather wanted a drink, and the mother refused to give him the money for it; she wanted it for herself. Eventually he stormed out, bringing comparative peace to the small household.

In the meantime, Laura's children had torn up the activity kit which Laura had developed. Seeing this, Laura's mother turned on the children and threatened to beat them with a belt prominently coiled on the table. Noticing the look on the director's face, she said, 'I keep it here to make them mind.' Evidently she wanted it known that she didn't actually use the belt on the children.

of the program's determination to seek out strengths and to learn from and with participating families and individuals in the community.

There is no question that families living in the South Broadway community are 'at risk'. Most of the staff's initial impressions about the community have proved accurate: family income levels are extremely low, with nearly half of the families participating in the program living on less than $6,000 per year.[5] (In 1987–8, the federally-defined poverty level was $11,208 per year for a family of four – our sample's average family size.)[6] Many families from Mexico and Central America do not have citizenship papers and live in constant fear of the law. Home visits have occasionally shown us parents who have nothing in the house to eat, who are victims of drugs and alcohol, who are driven to beating their spouses and children. Children have come to the pre-school too hungry to learn, or bearing the scars of abuse.

Despite these obvious conditions, ECFEP has chosen to recognize and work with the strengths of those it serves, rather than their vulnerabilities. The risk factors described above are environmental, not inherent; people are *placed* at risk by the conditions in which they live[7] and by further risk factors represented by their lack of knowledge about how to change or overcome these conditions, individually and as a group. It is evident that people who live 'on the edge' are by definition survivors, that they have inherent strengths which sustain them through difficult times. ECFEP seeks out and nurtures these strengths, and uses them as a platform on which to begin the complex process of empowerment. The case of Janet (see page 6) illustrates this point.

5. Chávez (1988), op cit.

6. United States Department of Agriculture (1987). Department of Human Services, Supplement 400-A. Washington, DC: Human Services Register.

7. Morgan, H. (1988). Personal communication.

Laura, extremely embarrassed, apologized for the situation in general and proceeded with the planned activity with her children. When the director took a picture of the family engaged in the activity, the children were fascinated by the camera. The director explained the camera to them and allowed each to take a picture, and the visit ended on a somewhat happier note.

Laura's perseverance in the face of these overwhelming obstacles was the strength which led to her empowerment. ECFEP assisted her in learning to maximize this strength by helping her to break down her problems into manageable goals, pose questions, identify desired solutions, and reflect on her actions. The staff demonstrated effective methods of positive discipline for her children (as in the example above). Most importantly, by befriending her, the staff reinforced her growing belief in herself and her abilities.

In small steps, Laura began to take control of her life. She began to care more about her appearance, and to raise her head and look at us while talking. She began to speak up in meetings of the parent group. We heard less about 'the brats' and more about 'my children'. She began to make friends with other parents and to share ideas on activities for the children with the pre-school staff.

A group crafts project showed us that Laura possessed considerable artistic talent, and we began to ask her assistence in providing artwork and calligraphy for the program. We bought her a set of calligraphy pens, and with practice her ability increased. Laura volunteered to help us in the office with light typing and clerical work. On our recommendation, she was accepted for a position in a nearby child day care facility, using skills she had learned in the pre-school.

At this point Laura's sense of empowerment began to pick up speed. Although she worked full-time, she enrolled in evening classes and eventually passed the GED high school diploma examination. Even though this required sitting the exam four separate times and three disappointing failures, Laura's strong perseverance would not allow her to give up until she had attained the coveted diploma.

Although both her children have now graduated from the pre-school, Laura still visits our offices frequently to talk. She has become a caring, nurturing parent who is involved in her children's lives. Although she still suffers bouts of depression and experiences difficult setbacks, she knows that whatever may happen in her life, she will have the strength to address it. For Laura, the process of empowerment has meant finding a way to counteract the risk factors in her environment, using her strong urge to succeed.

Risk factors: a research perspective

The risk factors so rampant in Janet's life are extremely pervasive. Many researchers have enumerated the environmental and situational conditions which place families and children at risk of emotional damage. Hetherington and Cox,[8] Elliott,[9] and Wallerstein[10] all examined the alienating effects of divorce on parents and children, and Clapp[11] found a distinct relationship between divorce and child suicide rates. Poverty has been significantly correlated with child abuse and other forms of family violence.[12,13] Meanwhile, the Connecticut State Board of Education[14] estimated that by 1990 nearly one child in four in the United States will live in a single-parent household, and that one-half of these households will have incomes below the federally-defined poverty level.

Other factors place children at risk for educational failure. It has been estimated that children in the United States spend twice as much time watching television as they spend in school,[15] a practice which has been associated with increased aggression,[16] social stereotyping,[17] and lowered academic and IQ scores.[18] It is becoming increasingly evident that the placement tests by which students are labeled at-risk educationally assess only a narrow range of skills and ignore an array of other equally valid abilities which students bring to the classroom. Gardner[19] outlined seven common learning styles, only one of which is addressed by traditional school curricula and assessment measures. The designers of these tests do not, in general, recognise other cultures' learning styles or resources as valid. Unfortunately, as Richardson-Koehler[20] noted, once a child has been labeled at-risk, the label is very difficult to lose. This, in turn, has negative effects on self-concept and the extent to which a child is willing to try again, as this always risks further failure.

Some research has concentrated on assessing the effects of expectations as risk factors for children and adults, particularly with regard to self-esteem. It has been frequently observed that children who are told that they are 'bad' begin to behave in a way that is consistent with this label. There is also evidence that

8. Hetherington, E.M. and Cox, R. (1985). 'Long Term Effects of Divorce and Remarriage on the Adjustment of Children'. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24:518-530.

9. Elliott, F.R. (1986). *The Family: Change or Continuity?* London: Macmillan.

10. Wallerstein, J.S. (1987). 'Children of Divorce: Report of a Ten-Year Follow-Up of Early Latency-Age Children'. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57:199-211.

11. Clapp, G. (1988). *Child Study Research: Current Perspectives and Applications*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

12. Gelles, R.J. (1980). 'Violence in the Family: A Review of Research in the Seventies'. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42:873-885.

13. Rutter, M. (1985). 'Family and School Influences: Meanings, Mechanisms and Implications'. In Nicol, A.R., *Longitudinal Studies in Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

14. Connecticut Board of Education. (1985). *Four-Year-Olds: Who is Responsible?* Report presented to the Connecticut State Department of Education.

15. National Institute of Mental Health. (1982). *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties. Volume 1*. Washington: US Government Printing Office.

Case Study: Janet

Janet's teenage years had been a struggle to survive. After dropping out of a school system which she felt had little to offer her, she had moved in with her boyfriend, Ron, who was ten years her senior, and at 17 had given birth to her first child. To please Ron, she started to smoke marijuana, and eventually, in her words, she 'tried the hard stuff' – heroin. Two more children were born of the relationship, and although Janet stopped using drugs for a while during her pregnancies, fearing for the babies, she returned to them after the birth. By 20 Janet was a mother of three, and still a child herself.

Like many Hispanics in the South Broadway community, Janet was fortunate in having a strong and caring extended family. This, along with her sharp intellect, was her primary strength. Family members tried constantly to intervene in Janet's life. Sometimes, briefly, they would be successful in getting her to reflect on her situation and attempt to make a change, but these interludes were short-lived. Her relationship with Ron and her dependence on drugs were like a roller-coaster ride, and she could not seem to disembark.

Janet's sister became involved with ECFEP during its first tentative activities in the community, and she began to bring Janet to ECFEP's initial series of parenting meetings. The family was now desperately concerned about her, and hoped that ECFEP would be able to help.

This was no easy task. The staff's initial attempts to befriend Janet and engage her in dialogue were met by cynicism and overt hostility. She began responding to our efforts when she saw that we listened to what she had to say and acted on her suggestions. Staff members asked her how they could help, reinforced her positive attempts, and helped her to realize that her contributions were important. Like an extended family, we provided support without judgement. We 'played' with her, using a light-handed, humorous approach. Behind the cynical exterior we found an intelligent and analytical mind with much to say on the needs of the community.

Janet's relationship with her youngest child, Sandra, was a source of much stress to her. She loved the child deeply, and yet their relationship was very difficult: Sandra whimpered, cried, and

16. Eron, L.D. and Huesmann, L.R. (1986). 'The Role of Television in the Development of Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior', in Olweus, D., Block, J., and Radke-Yarrow, M., eds, *The Development of Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior: Research, Theories, and Issues*. New York: Academic Press.

17. Greenberg, B.S. (1982). 'Television and Role Socialization: An Overview'. *Journal of Social Issues*, 42:7-27.

18. National Institute of Mental Health, (1982), op cit.

19. Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Crane Publishing.

20. Richardson-Koehler, V. (n.d.). *Effective Elementary School for At-Risk Students*. Unpublished report, University of Arizona, College of Education.

21. Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.

22. Mehan, H., Hertwick, A. and Meihls, J.L. (1986). *Handicapping the Handicapped*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

children fulfill less explicit expectations. In one study,[21] researchers randomly divided a group of children with average IQ scores into two groups. Privately they advised teachers that children in the first group had been assessed as gifted, and that those in the second group showed evidence of learning disability. Testing the children six months later, the researchers found that IQ scores had risen significantly for children in the group labeled 'gifted' and had dropped for those labeled 'learning disabled', even though the children themselves were not explicitly aware of their designations.

Thus expectations imposed by parents, teachers, and other authority figures may have a profound predictive impact on children's behavior, and possibly on their potential for growth. Moreover, the process of labeling a child at-risk may be based on vague or biased criteria. In their study of special education placement, Mehan, Hertwick and Meihls[22] observed that:

> ... the teacher's decision to refer students is only partially grounded in the students' behavior. It is grounded also in the categories that the teacher brings to the interaction, including expectations for academic performance and norms for appropriate classroom conduct. ...The teachers' norms were established, in part, by the rest of the students in their classrooms. Thus, they were only able to pay attention to a certain number of 'problem' students at one time. As one teacher pointed out, if a new student enters with greater problems than the rest of the at-risk students, that student will be added to the list and another taken off.

Assessing risk factors

Given the wide variety of conditions which place children and families at risk, how can actual risk factors be assessed for a particular individual? Obviously

clung to Janet while she tried to participate in ECFEP meetings. The child's response to any input was an emphatic 'no!', and her frequent temper tantrums, during which she would throw herself on the floor while banging her head, feet and hands, were interruptions for all of us. Janet reacted to this behavior pattern by alternating between anger and letting Sandra have her way.

As Janet continued to attend the ECFEP meetings, the staff dealt with Sandra's negative behavior in a consistent manner: they would wait passively until her tantrums were over and she had controlled herself and then provide her with a choice of positive activities. Over the first four months the tantrums escalated. Gradually, however, the child's behavior began to improve.

The staff's controlled, unvarying response to Sandra's whining and tantrums impressed Janet, and she began to emulate the approach. The positive progress of both mother and child became reciprocal, and each began to blossom.

While Sandra gained steadily in social skills and language development, Janet became a committed member of the initial ECFEP parent group. Her sharp perceptions of community needs were instrumental in the establishment of both Escuelita Alegre and the associated parent organization. She became a committed advocate for the program and accepted the necessity of making positive decisions for one's own life.

In her personal life, Janet translated this philosophy into action. She made a clean break with Ron, and attempted to wean herself from drug dependency, although this remains a constant battle in her life. She obtained her GED, and has remained consistently involved in her children's education through frequent classroom visits. As soon as Sandra is in school on a full-time basis, she intends to get a job.

Currently Janet is contemplating marriage to a man who, according to her family, treats her and her children exceptionally well. She is not rushing into this relationship, however. Her 'cold feet', as she calls this period of reflection on the marriage issue, are a result of her now well-developed skills in critically examining her reality and making her own decisions for herself and her family.

poverty alone, or divorce, or even child abuse and neglect do not always cause irreparable damage to those who experience them. Most social service workers can point to numerous examples of strong, well-balanced persons who have experienced traumatic events, as well as to shattered persons whose life experiences appear to have been relatively smooth. Again, children tested and labeled 'at-risk' in the school system do not inevitably fail in society: Einstein, Beethoven and Edison were all considered hopelessly incompetent by their teachers.

Gamble and Zigler[23] proposed an additive model for environmental risk factors in child development:

> As the number and strength of negative environmental encounters increase, there is a greater likelihood for negative impact on a child. For example, poor-quality day care places a child at risk for negative outcomes. ... His [or her] risks increase if he [or she] begins such care in his [or her] first year. The risk of negative outcomes rises further if he [or she] also comes from a stressful home. His [or her] risks grow further still if his [or her] parents are neglectful, and so on.

23. Gamble, T.J. and Zigler, E. (1986). 'Effects of Infant Day Care: Another Look at the Evidence'. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 56:26-41.

Sameroff,[24] however, considered a cumulative model too simplistic to describe the relationship between environment and individual:

> Any truly transactional model must stress the plastic character of the environment and of the organism as an active participant in its own growth. From this position, the child's response is thought to be more than a simple reaction to his [or her] environment. Instead, he [or she] is thought to be actively engaged in attempts to organise and structure his [or her] world. The child is, in this view, in a perpetual state of active re-organisation. ...The child alters his [or her] environment, and in turn is altered by the changed world he [or she] has created.

24. Sameroff, A.J. (1975). 'Early Influences on Development: Fact or Fancy?' *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 21 (4).

Applying such a model to the family context, the Bernard van Leer Foundation has noted the importance of understanding that influences accrete over a period of time before producing responses: '... it is clear that the influence that parents and children have on each other – and on others – is not an instantaneous reaction. "Influence", or "change", arises over an "accretion" of messages that, as it were, pile up until the argument for "being influenced" becomes irresistible.'[25]

25. Bernard van Leer Foundation (1988). *Primary Relationships and Transactional Theory*. Unpublished report.

Clearly there is no mathematical formula by which risks to individual development posed by environmental conditions can be predicted. Rather, the model through which risk accretes is a complex one through which a particular risk factor may be magnified or minimized by age, developmental level, previous experience, inherent character, and the status of the total environment. The fact that risk factors are present in the environment does not necessarily mean that an individual – or a family – is at risk.

Empowerment: a process model

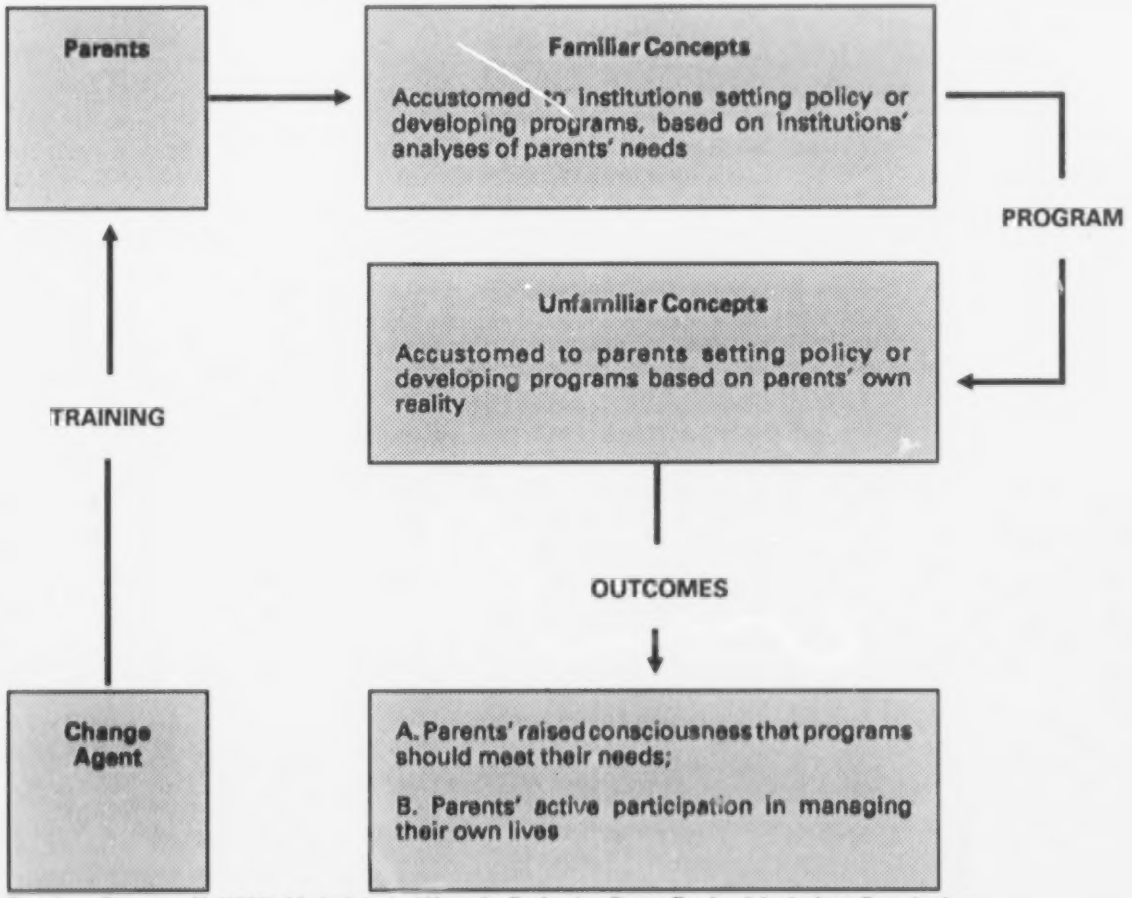
This ambiguity in assessing risk factors creates a need for specific qualities in ECFEP staff. Much of the empowerment process as viewed through ECFEP's model is dependent upon personalities – both those of the staff members and those of the participating parents. The staff's sensitivity and intuition in grasping and relating to the individual personalities of participating parents are critical factors in the program's success. The role of the staff in the empowerment

process requires that they are able to assess accurately the strengths of each parent and the risk factors impacting his or her life, and to determine what approach is needed to move the parent toward first, setting his or her own priorities, and second arriving at his or her own solutions.

To complicate the matter further, a constantly shifting population of parents entering and exiting the program creates shifts in the 'group personality' of the parent group as a whole, so that an approach that worked well in the past may not be applicable in the future. For example, parents involved in the program last year were generally reticent as a group; they moved at a relatively slow pace and preferred to concentrate their decision making on issues specifically related to the education of their children in the pre-school. This year's parents are much more interested in making an impact on the political and economic forces that affect their parenting role. These parents have involved themselves in presenting seminars to educational organizations and they testified before the New Mexico Legislative Education Study Committee in an attempt to make society aware of the need to create an ambience where empowerment can take place.

In practical terms, this means that there can be no blueprint for parent empowerment even within a single program. Rather, it is an individualistic approach to specific characteristics of the situation and the personality of the individual and/or group which lends credence to success. The overall strength of the ECFEP program model derives from its flexible and personal approach, in which each parent, each child and each family is seen as a unique and worthy

Figure 1: Flow chart model of parents' conceptual development


Parents
Familiar Concepts
Accustomed to institutions setting policy or developing programs, based on institutions' analyses of parents' needs
PROGRAM
Unfamiliar Concepts
Accustomed to parents setting policy or developing programs based on parents' own reality
TRAINING
OUTCOMES
Change Agent
A. Parents' raised consciousness that programs should meet their needs;
B. Parents' active participation in managing their own lives

Based on: Gianotten, V. (1986). *Methodological Notes for Evaluation.* Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation.

individual, and from its emphasis on strengths rather than weaknesses. It is a model for a process of building, rather than one of dissection and analysis.

In its proposal to the Bernard van Leer Foundation for a second operational phase (1987), ECFEP presented a graphic model of the process of empowerment through which parents seem to evolve as they participate in the program. The model is also useful as a guide to the staff's role in this process. Figure 1 describes the movement of parents from the familiar, passive role in receiving services to the unfamiliar role of change agents requesting services based on self-perceived needs and desires. It also indicates the reciprocal manner in which they, as change agents, assist in the repetition of this process as new parents enter the program. The process is integral to the program components – the pre-school, the home visits, and the parent organization. Yet empowerment is also a component in its own right.

In practical terms, the empowerment process described in Figure 1 may be seen as an approach to problem-solving. In order to become empowered, one must define an agenda – a series of priorities in one's own life, the lives of family members, the community as a whole. One must become able to articulate these priorities and to define a perspective for the reality which they represent. Then one must be able to envisage a range of specific solutions and to select responsibly from this range a specific strategy one wishes to pursue. A third step is to translate planning into action. Finally, it is absolutely necessary that one take time to reflect on the process which has occurred, to evaluate both the process and the results, and to abstract and internalize the lessons taught by the entire experience.

Parental development

Problem solving is a strong element in the meetings of the project's parents' organization. In organizational procedures, agendas are specified, solutions are sought and voted upon, tasks are broken down and addressed by committees, and results are submitted for the review and evaluation of the group as a whole. This also occurs constantly in the other program components.

In home visits, staff members listen to parents' concerns and, through reflective listening techniques, assist them in articulating problems, setting goals, anticipating outcomes, and evaluating strategies. Through their work in the pre-schools, parents must use this process constantly as they work with small and large groups of children, discuss their perceptions with staff members, and devise curricular activities. Problem solving is a universal and flexible technique which carries over into all aspects of families' lives, and through which they attain the self-confidence and self-accepted ability which are synonymous with empowerment.

Figure 2 provides a model of the hierarchy through which parents move from the familiar role of passive observation to the unfamiliar one of active agent for change along a series of evolutionary levels:

a. *Observer*. This stage is exemplified by parents who simply want to view the happenings or occurrences in the program. It is a passive stage of learning.

b. *Learner*. At this stage the parent takes an active learning role in the program by working with teachers, staff and/or other parents, but generally wishes to be told what to do. This stage, also, is relatively passive.

c. *Collaborator*: Parents work in concert with staff, both giving and receiving assistance. At this point, parents begin to transcend their passive orientation and to assimilate a team approach to the program.

d. *Teacher*: Parents begin to take the lead in the pre-school activities and home visit demonstrations. They actively seek out effective methods and/or materials to use with their children.

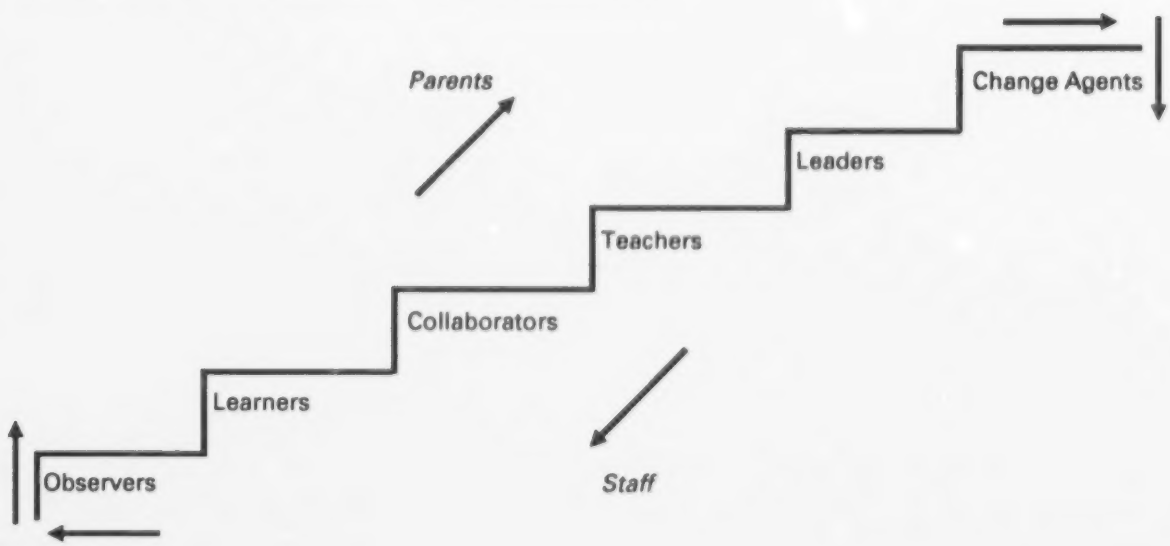
e. *Leader*: This stage leads to greater involvement in the lives of others in the program, and in creating and implementing policy for programmatic issues. Parents at this level may wish to hold office in the parent organization and become more active in program decision making.

f. *Change Agent*: At the highest level of empowerment parents demonstrate a critical awareness of their roles in the community and question the methodologies of institutions. They do not hesitate to involve themselves in implementing change and constantly revamp their personal situations and those of their community, seeking ways to improve them. They believe in themselves.

It should be noted that a parent may enter the program at any one of the aforementioned stages, and not all parents become active change agents by the time they exit the program. Some parents are eager from the beginning to teach in the pre-school, while for others it is initially very difficult even to enter the classroom. Different parents have different perceptions and skills, and each must be viewed as an individual by the staff.

The stages depicted in Figure 2 are defined in broad terms which are by no means fixed. They provide a useful framework for viewing the program's process and determining the approach to use in a given situation, depending on the evolution of the individual parent and the expertise of the individual staff member. As parents ascend the levels of involvement and empowerment, staff descends. For example:

Figure 2: Hierarchy of parent/staff participation and change



a. As parents *observe*, staff members act as *change agents* intervening in their lives by means of posing questions which encourage parents to examine their life situations and determine how they wish to be assisted.

b. As parents become *learners*, staff members *lead* them into the empowerment process by listening intently to their suggestions and, upon request, pointing out options.

c. As staff members *teach*, parents begin the process of *collaboration* with them and teach staff through the media of their cultural lifestyles and values.

d. As parents *lead*, staff members *learn* how to become an integral part of the parents' reality.

e. As parents become *active change agents* in their children's lives and in the community, staff members *observe* the process, gleaning information to help other families and to articulate the program model.

Case Study: Elizabeth

Like other parents, Elizabeth was invited to sit down and talk with us about her expectations when she first enrolled her child in Escuelita Alegre. Her eyes filled with tears and she could hardly speak as she shared her concerns about raising her children. She felt very reluctant to set parameters for them and was hesitant to make decisions which affected them and her. Her sense of vulnerability was reflected in her precarious attempts to talk with us without crying.

Elizabeth began her interaction with the program at the level of passive observer. Although she did not initially participate in the pre-school activities or the parent meetings, her love for her children and her sense of responsibility for them became increasingly apparent in these settings. Based on these observations, the staff took on the role of active change agents in this parent's life through deep and frequent dialogue.

Gradually Elizabeth began to take on the role of learner by asking questions and sharing experiences with the staff and the parent group. Accordingly, the staff began to fill the role of teacher, providing specific information and direction of her pre-school activities.

When she had been in the program for four months, Elizabeth was elected Secretary of the parent organization. This 'vote of confidence' by the other parents seemed to stimulate Elizabeth to begin acting as an equal partner with the staff in her child's education – the stage of collaboration. At this point she entered into a phase of increased self-analysis and rapid growth in the empowerment process.

Elizabeth now began to plan the curriculum for the preschool program based on themes discussed in meetings of the parent organization. She provided constant input to the teaching staff, and became very involved in her teaching role in the pre-school. In turn, she reported on her experiences and those of other parents during parent group meetings.

This growth did not come easily. As she spoke to staff and parents, Elizabeth's voice still quivered at times with anxiety. Over time, however, her confidence in herself and the value of her contributions grew visibly, and she began to speak in a more self-reliant tone.

Elizabeth continued to engage in critical examination of her lifestyle, and her analysis resulted in an increasingly focused approach toward improving her own, as well as her children's, status and education. When a secretarial position became available in the ECFEP administrative office, she applied and was hired. Immediately she enrolled in an art education class at the University, using the tuition waiver available to program staff.

Elizabeth has now been involved in ECFEP for 30 months, and her youngest child has just graduated from the pre-school. Her growth in leadership has continued to accelerate on all levels: as a staff member, she is a dedicated advocate for the program who is not afraid to voice her opinions on programmatic issues; as an individual, she continues to avail herself of every educational opportunity; and as a parent she has maintained constant vigilance over her children's

The case of Elizabeth illustrates the movement of a parent through the defined levels of the parent empowerment model, along with the staff's reciprocal pattern of response.

Limitations and individual differences

The ECFEP model appears to be successful on the whole, but none of its individual components works well with all families. As we have observed, parents motivated through the empowerment process to find jobs or go to school may find that these activities interfere with the requirement for parental involvement in the pre-school. Very poor families and those experiencing problems with substance abuse, violence, and so on, sometimes feel threatened by home visits, which they may interpret as an intrusion into family privacy or an attempt to judge the home environment. Again, not all parents function comfortably within the parent organization. Yet typically these hard-to-reach parents are those most in need of assistance.

Janet (see page 6) exemplifies the most vulnerable parents. As a bright student who had fallen through the cracks of the public school system, Janet was placed acutely at risk by her environment. The process of empowerment through which she moved as a program participant pointed her in a new direction. Now Janet's

educational program in the public schools. She examines, questions, and acts upon educational and social issues that affect her children, her community and her state.

For example, Elizabeth's newly acquired decision making skills led her to question the lack of parental input into her children's elementary school. She took it upon herself to call the school principal (that is, the school director) and ask why the school did not offer a parent/teacher organization. The principal replied that the school had previously attempted such a collaboration, but that meetings had not been well attended and they had failed to get anyone to volunteer for such an initiative during the current school year. Elizabeth followed up on this conversation by meeting with the principal to discuss the situation and stress the importance of parental input if quality programs were to be accomplished for the community's children.

During this meeting Elizabeth agreed to start a Parent/Teacher Association (PTA). On the principal's recommendation, she called on three other elementary school parents who had expressed an interest in a school PTA, and the four of them began to call other parents. (Interestingly two of these interested parents had been involved in Escuelita Alegre.) The PTA was quickly formed, and officers were appointed. When the appointed president left the organization to take a full-time job, Elizabeth agreed to take her place.

Under Elizabeth's leadership, the PTA's growth has been impressive. The mission of the group is to empower parents, support the school, and serve as a mechanism through which parents can directly affect school issues. In a community branded by the public schools as uninterested in educational issues, this PTA can serve as a city-wide model: when we asked Elizabeth recently how the organization was progressing, she exuberantly informed us that over 100 parents had attended the PTA's most recent open-house meeting.

ECFEP's role in this parent's empowerment appears to have been the provision of an environment conducive to her growth, in which her input is valued and respected. Elizabeth seems to draw her strength from the program and from the constant dialogue with other parents who serve as an extended family. Her involvement in Escuelita Alegre has taught her that parental involvement is a critical need in education, and she has also learned that many parents must become empowered and united if they are to be effective in promoting changes in systems.

Elizabeth's growth as a change agent for her community did not stop with her election to the PTA presidency. Recently she was elected as the local representative to the county PTA organization, where she will have the opportunity to bring the concerns and the strengths of her community experiences into a city-wide focus.

On a personal level, Elizabeth is continuing her studies at the University, and is currently seeking financial assistance to pursue a degree in education on a full-time basis. Elizabeth's growth has helped us to see that empowerment is an open-ended process which constantly presents new challenges.

growing ability to control her life has elevated her to the position of active change agent within her own context of reality. From this position, she derives the skills to deal with the risk factors in her environment, thereby transforming it into a positive, life-enhancing situation. She has attained power.

In Elizabeth's case, the process of empowerment is an overt occurrence which affects ever greater ranges of her life, her family, and her community as a whole. But it is also true that not all parents evolve to the level exemplified by Elizabeth. Not all parents aspire to community leadership, nor is this an appropriate role for all parents. For some, such as Janet, growth appears as an internal process which is difficult to monitor through external criteria. For Janet, attainment of the level of change agent might manifest itself in very different terms from those apparent in Elizabeth's history: for example, her increasing reliance upon her own beliefs and feelings in guiding her life, as opposed to those imposed on her by others. Laura's sphere of influence as active change agent, on the other hand, now includes both her children and her parents, as well as her personal accomplishments (see page 4). These variations occur because empowerment is based upon the inherent strengths of individuals, and these strengths are themselves unique.

Empowerment: a direction for the future

It has been noted previously that risk factors accrete within the environment, so that their negative effects on a given individual are impossible to predict. The important corollary for ECFEP staff is that for every negative environmental influence, there is an associated positive attribute. For example, poverty places families at risk, but it also engenders the strength to cope with the problem; if this were not so, people would not survive poverty. Residents of the South Broadway community know that they are at risk – they have been told so by waves of well-intentioned agencies who have come to 'help' them with their many documented problems. In Father Pantin's words, 'Whenever we "help" people by doing something *for* them we are telling these people explicitly or implicitly: "You are a weak, ignorant people. You do not even know what is good for you; so we the intelligent, the powerful, will do it for you".'[26]

26. Pantin, (1988), op cit

But although they are constantly made aware of their problems, many people who have been placed at risk do not know that they have strengths. They do not know that they are the experts on their own needs and those of their families and children. Nor are they aware of the importance of their role as their children's prime educators, and of their unique ability to perform this crucial responsibility. Such knowledge is gained not through 'help', but through the process of empowerment.

27. Paz, R. and Paz, Y. (1988). 'On community and education: an Israeli perspective', in *Towards a Brighter Future*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The ultimate goal of ECFEP is total institutionalization within the community. As families absorb more and more of the program's methods and philosophies, it becomes more their own. In essence this is a process of community empowerment: 'Without the empowerment of the community – without the evolvement of patterns of self-help, self-reliance and self-activation; without the development of human resources in, and of, the community; without the fostering and support of local initiatives; indeed, without the community's assumption of responsibility and control for its own affairs and functioning – without all these, the success of the most well-meaning early childhood educational programme will be partial, at best.'[27]

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Studies and Evaluation Papers is a series of background documents drawn from field experience to present relevant findings and reflections on 'work in progress'. The series therefore acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas.

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The **Bernard van Leer Foundation** is an international, philanthropic and professional institution based in The Netherlands. Created in 1949 for broad humanitarian purposes, the Foundation concentrates its resources on support for the development of community-led and culturally appropriate initiatives that focus on the developmental needs of children from birth to eight years of age. Currently, the Foundation supports some 100 major projects in more than 40 developing and industrialised countries.

As part of its mandate, the Foundation also supports evaluation, training and the dissemination of project experiences to an international audience. It communicates the outcomes of these activities to international agencies, institutions and governments, with the aim of improving practice and influencing policies to benefit children.

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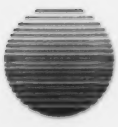

Bernard van Leer Foundation, PO Box 82334, 2508 EH The Hague, The Netherlands
Tel: (070) 351 2040; Telex: 33678 bvlfh nl; Fax: (070) 350 2373